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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001792

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: PRE-ELECTION ENVIRONMENT IS PEACEFUL,
ACTIVE

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, for
Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. In a political environment lately caught up in existential questions, the normalcy of the current election environment provides a reassuring contrast. Debates are lively but treading familiar paths. While the parties are seized with election fervor, Turkey isn't getting carried away; police and security forces are providing routine protection. Election rhetoric is hot, but parties' behavior is not. END SUMMARY.

Politics is Local, but Terrorism Hits the Heart

12. (C) The themes of this election are reasonably quotidian, given the alleged stakes (Chief of the General Staff General Buyukanit earlier this year declared that in its history, the Republic has never faced a graver threat to its existence, implying that the elected government's secret Islamic agenda could destroy Turkey from within). Polls and many contacts describe unemployment and the economy as a major focus for voters; despite good economic numbers, many people claim they don't feel the difference in their pockets. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has emphasized economic and quality of life issues, showcasing all they have accomplished in government through projects like KOYDES village infrastructure improvement. In his Antalya rally, the Prime Minister worked to keep the focus on local needs and accomplishments, such as creating roads to access remote villages. AKP also plays the victim card, decrying extrapolitical (military) intervention in the recent abortive presidential election.

13. (C) In our pre-election travel throughout Anatolia, contacts across the spectrum have passionately raised terrorism and security issues as chief concerns, explaining that the "martyred" soldiers may as well be their own sons, so deeply do they feel the loss. Political rhetoric among party leaders has dwelt on the past and prospective presidential election process, the best means to end PKK terror, and accusations of corruption. The Nationalist Action Party (MHP) has been beating the drum to execute imprisoned terrorist leader Abdullah Ocalan -- the very platform that swept them into parliament in 1999, but which MHP failed to achieve when Turkey, mindful of its EU bid,

abolished the death penalty. EU issues have been pushed to the back burner. Cyprus has also not been a major focus.

Sights and Sounds

¶4. (U) From Ankara to Antalya, and from Izmir to Igdir, Turkey is covered in party banners. Streamers of colored squares of cloth (Republican red and white for all parties except AKP, which stands out with royal blue and orange) stamped with party logos are draped from lampposts and buildings, in some places so densely that they provide shade.

Most party posters simply show a photograph of the party leader or the local parliamentary candidate -- a four-story image of Youth (Genc) Party leader Cem Uzan in Ankara portrays him in a hand-over-heart gesture of modest sincerity, side by side with his party's local candidate. One unusual Republican People's Party (CHP) poster in Erzurum, the subject of a criminal complaint, juxtaposes a map of the Middle East against one that the Greater Middle East and North Africa Initiative allegedly foresees, including a Greater Armenia (the complaint pertains to the fact that PM Erdogan is described as the "co-chairman" of the initiative).

¶5. (U) AKP's poster campaign plays on its accomplishments; one series of posters shows individual "regular folks" underneath headlines touting achievements of the AKP, such as "I got my school books for free," "I can receive treatment at the hospital of my choice," or "With monthly payments, I became a homeowner." One AKP candidate in Yozgat bears a logo under his name to the effect of "My duty to Yozgat is for me an act of worship." Posters are placed in designated billboards, party bus windows, or the insides of local party

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headquarters; Mission officers have seen no papering of the sides of buildings or walls, nor have we observed new graffiti or other election-related vandalism. Party vans with loudspeakers broadcast often-competing tinny jingles as they whiz back and forth through towns and cities.

¶6. (U) Parties in Turkey send virtually no mass mailings (although a few months ago a local branch of CHP did send letters encouraging new voters to register). Instead, they rent neighborhood shop fronts for the last few weeks of the campaign period, decorate with party banners, and let the voters stop in to ask questions. CHP, however, announced on June 12 that in lieu of rallies in Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir, CHP would send 3 million letters to voters.

New Technologies

¶7. (SBU) Undoubtedly fueled by the extensive attention it got after a temporary banning this spring (when a Greek-posted video unleashed outrage by alleging that Ataturk was gay), YouTube is becoming a site for a narrow slice of computer-literate elites with high-speed access to exchange political views. YouTube provides a virtually unregulated forum for propaganda -- and public retorts -- during the last few days of the campaign, when propaganda bans limit some options. Several Turkish-language rap songs, accompanied by photo montages of military funerals and women in full black "carsaf" covering, have been growing in popularity; although ownership is not certain, at least one popular rap appears sponsored by Genc Party and the Kuvayi Milliye neo-nationalist organization. Viewership is in the tens of thousands. One candidate has an on-line presence in the virtual world website, "Second Life."

Politics with Words, not Fists

¶8. (C) This election period does not appear to be unduly taxing security forces. Although Turkey has much experience

with political violence, and despite the purported stakes, violence has not been a part of this election period to date.

Rival parties leave each other to conduct their campaign activities unmolested and unharassed, as far as we have seen, though party leaders regularly exchange verbal attacks. Tensions between parties, such as they are, appear more acute in the capitol than in the provinces, where small-town culture and ties appear to provide a grounding for interparty civility. The governor of Eskisehir claimed that apart from the flags (a few hung illegally), it was as if no election was happening at all.

Southeastern View

19. (SBU) On a trip through Diyarbakir and Elazig provinces all but the smallest villages were festooned with party banners, billboards and posters. In Diyarbakir, the atmosphere was fairly low key, as the contest there is largely a two-party race and there are very few undecided voters. However, we saw the Workers' Party van, emblazoned with its friendly slogan, "No U.S., No EU, Independent Turkey," while a recorded message accused America of manifold sins. In Elazig, where a number of parties are jostling for the five MP slots at stake, the campaigning was far more intense. A triple-wide AKP billboard welcomes drivers to town and reminds them that the party has built thousands of kilometers of divided highways. Some balconies were decorated with the Islamist Saadet flag -- a reminder that this region includes many fully covered women in black. In the city center the visuals are overwhelming, with posters and banners everywhere. Local son and Democrat Party (DP) leader Mehmet Agar's photo is ubiquitous, and the party's provincial headquarters was full of energy at 5 pm as dozens of volunteers prepared for another evening of canvassing.

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